APRA

Agricultural Policy Research in Africa

Future Agricultures

RESEARCH TO POLICY INFLUENCING – LESSONS FROM APRA ON EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Acronyms

APRA	Agricultural Policy Research in Africa
ALRE	Applied Learning on Relevance and Effectiveness
CAPI	Computer Assisted Personal Interview
FAC	Future Agricultures Consortium
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
ICE	Information, Communication and Engagement
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
PIPA	Policy Influencing Pathways Analysis
TOC	Theory of Change

Executive Summary

This paper presents some of the learning on efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability generated by an accompanied learning process; which supported the latter part of a six-year research programme on agricultural commercialisation covering nine African countries and involving multiple research and policy influencing teams.

Research design should be outcome orientated, focussing on the key questions to be answered, with qualitative and quantitative methods informing and complementing each other. The logistical planning and management of survey work in remote areas faced with changing weather and other challenges should not be underestimated. Choosing the appropriate subjects and sites for research are critical early decisions that need time and rigour, including scoping visits, which should not be rushed, alongside competing priorities of team recruitment, contracting, obtaining research permissions, etc.

Understanding has grown around the need for providing the right evidence, at the right time, in the right form, to the right people. This requires identifying evidence demand, thus enabling a focus on key evidence 'nuggets' that are of most use to policy makers and practitioners. Planning the policy influencing early in the programme was found to be important; and researchers appreciated the opportunity to start early in making contact with policy influencers, including the local media, and to conceive their research outputs in terms of their policy-influencing potential. Actual delivery requires a combination of following carefully planned impact pathways and the ability to recognise and respond to new communication opportunities as they arise.

The sustainable outcomes from a research programme are much more than just the written research outputs. These include spreading the knowledge, getting it internalised, getting it in curricula, and ensuring the raw data is available for future researchers. But, beyond this, increasing the research capability among the African research teams, building the professional and personal relationships between researchers, and strengthening the networks between organisations working on commercialisation and inclusion issues, are all important subsidiary outcomes. The overall goal of the planned impact pathways is evidence-based changes in commercialisation policy and practice that results in agricultural commercialisation being more inclusive for women, reduces rural poverty, and improves food and nutrition security.

1. Background on APRA and ALRE

Which pathways to agricultural commercialisation are the most effective in empowering women, reducing rural poverty, and improving food and nutrition security in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) is a six-year research programme[1] of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC), which aims to address this question through in-depth, interdisciplinary, comparative research across nine countries. Through this work, APRA is generating high-quality evidence and policy-relevant insights on more inclusive pathways to agricultural commercialisation. The research teams are complemented by an Information, Communication and Engagement (ICE) team.

Applied Learning on Relevance and Effectiveness (ALRE) is a small component of APRA, designed to support action learning and reflection in real time during implementation of the main research. Much of this learning is context specific and tacit, with informed and independent 'critical friend' input at key planning and reflection points. This has involved interactive approaches between research and policy influencing teams in workshops, on Zoom calls, and with comments on specific pieces of work. The objective of this process is to improve APRA's relevance and effectiveness.

This report pulls together some of the more generalisable understandings on efficiency, effectiveness, and learning in accordance with the milestones agreed with the funding partner.

2. Methodology

ALRE has encouraged reflection on efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability at various points in the programme. Initially, these were sessions in regional and global planning and Policy Influencing Pathways Analysis (PIPA)[2] workshops, annual programme wide conferences, and, more recently, in country team/workstream Zoom meetings. The purpose of these reflections was primarily tacit and interactive, for the teams to discuss and generate their own learnings for their own use, rather than being extractive for formal reporting. The objective was to give space for the APRA

1 With headquarters at the Institute of Development Studies, APRA is running from 2016 to 2022 with the generous support of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

2 Douthwaite, B., Alvarez, S., Keating, J.D.H. and Mackay, R. (2009) Policy Influencing Pathways Analysis (PIPA) and Research Priority Assessment [online]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287020432_Participatory_impact_pathways_analysis_PIPA_and_research_priority_assessment. This is a methodology used by APRA for planning policy influencing.

implementation teams to reflect and share experiences and learnings, and therefore enable those involved to incorporate learning directly into their ways of working and problem solving. However, alongside this process, it was possible to record some more generalisable learning.Introduction

This 'learning' has been fed-back to other teams and utilised in later stages of the APRA process for further reflection, before being recorded in this report as 'APRA learning'.

3. Efficiency

Efficiency is about delivering results in an economic and timely way. What has APRA learnt?

3.1 Lessons learn on research identification

The importance of choosing the right subjects and sites for research can't be overstated. There can be pressure for rushed decision-making in order to get initial surveys underway, but there is a need to step back and consider the research purpose. The site or case may be efficient in producing data, but will that data be effective in delivering the research purpose? Both efficiency and effectiveness are needed.

The challenges of doing this are significant; both time and resources need to be ring fenced for this during the design/inception phase. This is likely to include quick scoping/ground truthing visits and disciplined use of checklists. Such visits should include a genuine selection of a site, rather than a planning visit for a site assumed to be suitable, and further appraisal and logistics planning will be needed once a site is selected. There is a risk that this gets squeezed out by all of the other pressures in the inception phase – recruitment, contracting, obtaining research permissions, etc.

It should be acknowledged that the research is being conducted in a changing context, and that some assumptions made at the start (e.g., the reality of a control 'no treatment' area) may no longer be true throughout the study period. So, constant intelligence gathering and ability to reflect and re-plan is important. Quasi-experimental designs are particularly challenging in this regard. There is a need to be clear on assumptions in the design which are outside APRA control. For instance, how reliant is the research design on government policy staying the same (or changing), or of a government initiative being implemented according to a planned timetable?

There will need to be a balance between keeping to the approved research design and making necessary adjustments based on the changing context. These need to be acknowledged and recorded as part of the audit trail. Covid-19, for instance, created massive research challenges, but also some new research opportunities.

3.2 Lessons from research design

Considerable time is needed to clarify the research focus and use of secondary data to understand the 'big picture'. There is a need for clear, outcome-orientated design of both quantitative and qualitative survey work, focussing on what is most important to know for the desired outcome and avoiding the collection of unnecessary details (or details there is not time or budget to analyse) – **less is more!**

Due to limited budget, there may be a need to make compromises on a number of studies and sample size; and care is needed to avoid the sample becoming too ambitious for the sums available. Smart integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches may help. This is likely to involve qualitative work early on to inform and refine any quantitative surveys, followed by further qualitative work to explain the quantitative findings.

Caution is needed in assuming adequate quality historic baseline data exists. Also, in variable contexts (good and bad seasons, economic cycles), the reliance on data sets from baseline and end- line points, even if widely spaced, need to be interpreted with caution. There is a danger that the significant challenges of quantitative survey and analysis push qualitative surveying to the sidelines, or to parallel comment, rather than the qualitative and quantitative approaches forming an integrated whole with synergy between them.

Teams found a need to capture more intra-HH (household) issues of gender and youth than the design enabled, and, in some cases, noted that youth were not specifically interviewed in the quantitative survey. It was also important to define what is meant by a HH in a local context.

The Southern Africa team found there should be more focus on 'farm labour', which is more important than often assumed. Therefore, labourers should be part of the sample. Livestock, food and nutrition security indicators were squeezed and undervalued in the questionnaire.

The challenge of agreeing a common questionnaire across countries was difficult and most agreed that a long questionnaire was inevitable (up to three hours).

Getting agreement from informants to participate in the survey required incentives, as they had to devote quite a lot of time to answering the questions. In East Africa, household interviewees were paid, while in West Africa no payments were given – although a present, such

as a packet of soup, was given. In Southern Africa, payments were not made, and some interviewees pointed out they were missing out on piecework income by doing the interview. This needs to be thought about and planned.

Pre-testing of the survey instruments was critical and took a great deal of time and attention to detail. In West Africa it was merged with enumerator training, which was too late in the process. The training and backstopping of field teams was also very time consuming, and additional country-specific sections in the questionnaire disrupted its logical flow.

It is important to recognise that qualitative survey work is just as skilled as quantitative.

3.3 Lessons on research implementation

The challenges of obtaining accurate/truthful data needs to be recognised:

- Standardisation of local measurement units is needed.
- Respondents may have a vested interest to skew the results.
- Some people (e.g., farm labour, youth) may be left out of the sample.

Community acceptance of enumerators is important – proper entry/introduction into each community is essential, and a local guide can help give acceptance. Safeguarding of both interviewers and interviewees is important and needs active planning for and protocols.

The East Africa team encountered technical challenges while learning the new Survey Solutions software and Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) hardware for the data collection. However, the Southern Africa team found the CAPI programme and tablet approach to be excellent. The West Africa team also found the CAPI system to be good, as it enabled the process to be faster with less errors and provided the ability to 'skip' sections that were not relevant. Changing enumerator assignments (when households were not available) in the field was particularly challenging using the CAPI system. Synchronising to avoid data loss was valuable, and enumerator checking and supervision required a large investment of time. An improved dashboard is needed for real-time monitoring.

Different APRA researchers used different software packages for data analysis – SPSS, STATA – leading to some differences in the analysis and checking. The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) might want to think about standardisation in future.

Task changes during research implementation were frequent, requiring flexibility and agile decision-making. There were serious logistical constraints getting field enumerators to the field – weather, distance, transport. These constraints led to a reduction in sample size in the WS1 rice study in Tanzania, and the cost proved greater than anticipated.

Getting survey informants to recall trends over the previous five years appeared to work – and this was confirmed by qualitative research.

The experience of trying to track down historic data sets and identifiers should remind us all of the need to ensure our current studies leave traceable and accessible data. There is a commitment to store on IDS open source and UK Government sites, but the desirability of also storing data in host countries was identified and needs to be planned, agreed, and actioned.

3.4 Lessons on research communication

Media coverage at the start of evidence gathering is useful, but there is a need to manage expectations. There also needs to be clarity on resource availability for communications. An early PIPA review to reflect and plan further would be helpful. It is important to use communication methods relevant to stakeholders – what are their demands? Needs? How? Who? To achieve this, it was useful to have policy capacity in the regional hubs.

Policy briefs, short three to six page publications with clear concise recommendations for policy makers, are considered a key communications tool. However, the challenge is to move from them being shortened versions of research findings to more demand driven content which responds to key policy challenges that policy makers are grappling with in their respective contexts. This will aid in better formulation of 'effective' and evidence-based policies and practices. Sometimes, this requires a cultural shift by researchers driven by an understanding of the political economy context.

Some of the pathways to better research communication are quite mundane. Regular chasing of researchers (e.g., to deliver promised blogs or report influencing contacts) is an important but thankless task. It was valuable to have the ICE team and the communications experts at WRENmedia available to provide this constant support, in particular to help with policy briefs, social media, and blogs.

A challenge in a longitudinal study is that expectations are raised among evidence users, but for much of the period there is little to report back. However, it is possible to report back 'research updates', and blogs may be a particularly effective approach in doing this. Preliminary nuggets can also be shared at these times.

We should not only be thinking about policy makers and national stakeholders when communicating research results. It is important not just to extract – reporting back to the farmers/key informants is very important but gets squeezed in budgets and time. Feeding back preliminary findings to community stakeholders and extension staff should be seen as a core part of our engagement strategy. This needs to be timetabled and budgeted. Reporting back through schools or local radio may be appropriate. Translation of documents in local languages for local stakeholders can be helpful, and teams discovered that a proper translator is required for this task; you can't use Google Translate.

Hosting local and national events with key stakeholders and providing hardcopies of outputs is important for outreach and engagement. Participating in large national/international conferences to share our outputs can be expensive (fees for a separate booth/stall can be very high). In these cases, it may make sense to join with one or more partners to spread the costs and still have a proper presence. Another good way to increase visibility and take part in larger conferences is by working with and/or through well connected partners, or 'knowledge brokers', who may be hosting the events or organising sessions at them.

We need to find ways to capture outcomes from unplanned (but valuable) engagement opportunities. APRA is trying a WhatsApp reporting system to collect lessons and insights from different engagements and sharing them in real time.

3.5 Lessons on policy influencing

The revised PIPA process with the targeted Theory of Change (TOC) focusing on outcome level changes, was found to be a powerful tool for identifying appropriate engagement tactics and strategy. It helps provide a quick mental map for clarifying priorities and adds value to the 'Why?' 'What?' and 'How?' – i.e., Why are we doing this? What is the message – the 'nugget' – we want to convey? How do we do it?

This can involve identifying and involving policy makers from the beginning, identifying relevant policies in relation to the expected research outcomes, and breaking the wall and building bridges to get to higher-impact policy makers by identifying 'champions' – transferring research outputs to higher level decision takers. To do this, researchers need to learn to play in the policy influencing space, and this requires training sessions.

Trying to involve officials, from senior advisors to ministers/presidents, at an early stage of influencing processes, and supporting them to act as APRA 'champions', is effective. From experience, there is often a significant time-lag between 'contributing' or 'intervening' in a specific policy process and having any outcome. It can sometimes take years, but that should not stop us from engaging.

Timing is critical, and providing evidence after a particular policy has been produced may be a waste of time. It is therefore essential to try to engage when the process is 'live' and decision-makers are seeking advice and information. It may be useful to work with the comms team to develop calendars of key activities and events to know when to engage.

It is important to identify and work with policy advisers and drafters who are likely to use APRA knowledge products as reference material. This may involve assisting advisors to write key policy documents and strategies (working behind the scenes), but allowing them to take credit for the work so that they have ownership over the ideas and agendas.

There may be several routes to informing and influencing a policy process. Sometimes it is not always straightforward to determine who is the policy maker or best target for influencing. Parliamentary caucuses or select committees working on agriculture-related themes are often looking for evidence and analysis to inform their work. This may require written or oral communication which should be well-structured, concise, and straight to the point —and point to actions for practically filling knowledge gaps.

A key concern in APRA was knowing what the budget provision was for influencing, and how to be able to react to 'unplanned' opportunities that need expenditure. The inflexible nature of the Department for International Development (DFID) contract made this more difficult. However, a way forward that worked for both sides was identified, which involved:

- Recognising that there are country engagement budgets (but not for the hub).
- Recognising the need to plan and budget ahead where possible.
- Acknowledging the need for flexibility to react to opportunities and incur reasonable unplanned expenditure.

We also shouldn't forget about industry interest groups. The private sector is a key player in the agricultural commercialisation agenda. We need to do more thinking about how we interact with both domestic and, in some cases, international private sector actors.

4. Effectiveness

Effectiveness in achieving APRA objectives has frequently been framed in relation to the adoption of research evidence and achieving changes in the narrative, policy, or practice. How do researchers interact with policy makers and other evidence users in order to effect change?

This influence was planned in APRA through a series of Policy Influencing Pathway Analysis (PIPA) workshops. These led to developing TOC for the different APRA country teams and regional hubs. From this process, the concept of evidence 'nuggets' was developed – distilled units of research evidence in an accessible and useful form to the evidence user. The process of using nuggets was explored in a policy influencing workshop, with lessons developed into a paper on 'The Diamond of Influencing'.[3]

Several pointers on effective policy influencing have been articulated by those involved in the APRA process:

Effective influencing requires an understanding of the policy space and who the key players are.

- Try to set the agenda on policy change. If you miss this, all the rest may become irrelevant.
- Demand-driven evidence is more effective than supply.
- Provide solutions and delivery mechanisms, not just an analysis of the problem.
- Tailor the message to a national or regional narrative and timetable.
- Get the message noticed – the press can be the best way to do this, sometimes with a simple idea that gets people's interest and leads to demand for more detail.
- Whittle down the shopping list of issues to specific 'nuggets', recognising that different 'nuggets' may be relevant at different levels or to different evidence users.
- Domesticate ideas and knowledge products into language that programme constituents understand – farmers, traders, project managers, policy makers, policy users, politicians, and academics.
- Identify champions or highly-networked individuals who can push evidence and be prepared to work in alliances and networks.
- Make evidence accessible through the media and other communicative channels with direct access to politicians and policymakers.
- Policy makers tell us, 'speak my language so that the evidence aligns with my mandate', and, specifically, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) asked for evidence on the 'best way to make people more resilient'.

5. Sustainability

According to the Development Assistance Committee criteria, sustainability is the extent to which the net benefits of the intervention will continue or are likely to continue.[4]

An early internal process learning was that the concept of 'APRA sustainability' had different meanings to different stakeholders:

- Environmental sustainability (of commercial agriculture) – what is APRA investigating and saying?
- Environmental sustainability (of APRA operations) – what is APRA doing to limit its own footprint?
- Organisational sustainability – do we want APRA to continue as a recognised organisation/network after funding ends?
- Outcome sustainability (APRA legacy) – what can we do to ensure the APRA research findings, knowledge, policy changes, networks, and capabilities continue after funding ends?

All of these have their importance. However, what is being concentrated on in this section is the outcome sustainability, which has also been described as the APRA legacy.

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3 Clark, L. (2020) *The Diamond of Influence: A Model for Exploring Behaviour in Research to Policy Linkages,* ALRE Research Note 1, Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: https://www.futureagricultures.org/publications/alre-research-note/alre-research-note-the-diamond-of-influence-a-model-for-exploring-behaviour-in-research-to-policy-linkages/

4 OECD (2019) *Better Criteria for Better Evaluation: Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use* [online]. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/revised-evaluation-criteria-dec-2019.pdf

The APRA legacy is expected to involve changes in:

- **Knowledge.** Perhaps the most obvious outcome of APRA, but it is important to think beyond the knowledge products (like publications) to include people internalising the knowledge and knowing that the knowledge exists and where to find it. This may be operationalised in changes in curricula and what is taught to future generations of students. Sometimes, this knowledge may live on as a change in narrative. A part of knowledge curation is the important question about where raw data and knowledge syntheses are held and made available for future generations of African researchers.

- **Capability.** This is mainly held within the large number of African researchers who have been involved in the different parts of APRA, and is often centred on the practical experience of field research, processing results, producing policy influencing materials, and being engaged in policy influencing interactions.

- **Relationships.** These are between individuals, often between people at different stages of their research careers, and between individual researchers and influencers. FAC experience showed that these were very important in post-programme careers.

- **Networks.** These are relationships between organisations, and they can be formal or informal, bilateral or multilateral 'platforms'. They are important for future programming and policy influencing.

- **Profile and visibility.** Both of individuals but particularly of African organisations. Are the organisations that train and support the APRA researchers raising their profile from associating with APRA? There are questions of how much branding should be of IDS/APRA and how much African organisations?

- **Policy.** Policy change based on better evidence is a major expected outcome of APRA and will be part of the legacy.

- **Practice.** Ultimately, APRA can be judged on whether it contributed to actual practice change, and the positive and negative outcomes from these practices.

Different parts of APRA have influenced all of these. However, much of this legacy building has been incidental. A challenge for the remaining period of APRA is to consolidate and maximise this legacy, and it seems likely that this will require some more conscious planning and reflection.

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The APRA Directorate is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK (www.ids.ac.uk), with regional hubs at the Centre for African Bio-Entrepreneurship (CABE), Kenya, the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), South Africa, and the University of Ghana, Legon. It builds on more than a decade of research and policy engagement work by the Future Agricultures Consortium (www.future-agricultures.org) and involves more than 100 researchers and communications professionals in Africa, UK, Sweden and USA

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